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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001761

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [EPET](#) [PHUM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: SIGNS OF RENEWED FIGHTING IN WARRI

REF: A. ABUJA 1656

[B](#). ABUJA 1684

[C](#). ABUJA 1325

[D](#). LAGOS 1535

CLASSIFIED BY CDA RICK ROBERTS FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) AND (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Indications from various sources in the Warri area suggest strongly that the relative peace seen in the region for the past seven weeks is about to break. Reports of a recent Ijaw attack on a boat of unarmed Itsekiri villagers attempting to return to villages destroyed by Ijaw militants in March, and the high prospects of Itsekiri retaliation, may hasten Nigerian military plans to send troops on operations far into the creeks. This could include a planned Joint Task Force attack on the key Ijaw militant base of Okerenkoko. Should that happen, there could be numerous casualties among both combatants and non-combatants. END SUMMARY

NEW PHASE OF MILITARY OPERATION

[1](#)2. (C/NF) "Operation Restore Hope" carried out by a Joint Task Force under the command of General Zamani was launched in early August with the ambitious tasks of: 1) disarming militants in the swamps around Warri; 2) curbing the bunkering of oil in the area; 3) protecting oil production installations; and 4) restoring law and order to Warri town. So far it appears to have been effective only in maintaining a fragile peace in Warri town. The riverine areas of Warri's Southwest, South and North local government areas (LGAs) remain closed -- lawless and not patrolled by Joint Task Force personnel. This was confirmed to CRO and Lagos Poloff and Econoff by oil company and NGO sources during an October 7-8 visit to Warri town, and the Chevron terminal at Escravos in Warri Southwest.

[1](#)3. (C/NF) Chevron security and management officials at Escravos and Shell security manager in Warri town indicated the Joint Task Force sent in to implement Operation Restore Hope has shown underwhelming operational prowess. Both companies believe that forces sent to the area were deployed with almost no logistical support and, consequently, have done little more than deploy a few hundred men at the four or five reopened Shell flow stations, and these deployments have been funded largely by Shell.

[1](#)4. (S/NF) During their visit to Warri, CRO and accompanying officers met with Shell's Security Manager for Shell's Western Division Tony Obuaya. Obuaya claimed that the military's plans for Operation Restore Hope included the establishment of a permanent military base in the swampy area of Warri, from which patrols could be launched. Despite the current limited scope of the military's deployment thus far, he suggested this plan might be implemented soon. The area of Jones Creek (site of a key Shell flow station) has been selected for the base, and within that area, the town of Okerenkoko on the Escravos River has been identified as the key point, Obuaya claimed.

[1](#)5. (S/NF) Once an Itsekiri village, Okerenkoko lies between Escravos and Warri near major water arteries leading throughout the troubled region. It is now the base for the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), the Ijaw militants who stage attacks throughout the Warri creeks from this town. The Joint Task Force may be planning a major offensive to search Okerenkoko for weapons and then establish a Nigerian army base there, according to Obuaya. This would provide the military an excellent reach into the swamps, he noted. It could also be a vicious fight, he conceded.

[1](#)6. (S/NF) Obuaya admitted that Shell assumed some liability for human rights incidents when it enlisted the military's aid to restart oil production and funded many of the military's deployment costs. "We want to keep civilian

casualties to a minimum," he declared, and claimed the U.S. experience in Iraq proved that confronting well-armed insurgents in difficult terrain often leads to the loss of innocent lives. (Comment: We do not know whether Obuaya's candor would be approved by Shell's front office, but his continuing use of "we," his military planning details, and other observations by our reporting officers made a convincing case that this Shell/Nigeria Security Manager based in Warri is coordinating oil and military deployments closely with the senior officers of the Joint Task Force. End Comment)

IJAW MILITANTS PROVOKED BY SHELL RETURN TO PRODUCTION

17. (C/NF) Mission officers October 7 met separately with leaders of the two main Ijaw militant groups in the Warri area: the Gbaramatu clan's Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), and the Egbema clan's Egbema United Front (EUF). Both groups expressed irritation with Shell's efforts to resume production in the Warri swamps using military protection, and threatened to disrupt Shell's operations if their grievances (read extortion demands) were not addressed. Israel Tiemo, the Vice President of the EUF, was quite clear. He noted that the EUF controls the Egbema region of Warri North LGA -- home to two Shell flow stations not yet reopened -- and declared that the EUF would not respect any Shell negotiations with other Ijaw groups (i.e. FNDIC) over resumption of production. Shell must deal directly with EUF, Tiemo demanded. (NOTE: The EUF was involved in the mid-July kidnapping of a Nigerian Chevron official in Warri, reported in refs C and D, for which Israel Tiemo was arrested. Both the Chevron and Tiemo have since been released. END NOTE)

RETURN OF ITSEKIRI REFUGEES TRIGGERS NEW VIOLENCE

18. (C) Mission officers met in Sapele and Koko October 8 with leaders of the Itsekiri communities displaced from their villages in the Warri swamps since March 2003. Although appreciative of the disaster relief assistance given by the USG and Chevron, the Itsekiri leaders complained that the assistance had run out and the situation for most refugees has become dire. Food and clothing are in short supply, and some youths in these refugee communities are now turning to crime and prostitution in an attempt to sustain themselves and their families. The pressure to return to their destroyed villages, despite the severe insecurity in the swamps, has become acute.

19. (C) Itsekiri community leaders bemoaned what they claimed were the Ijaw militants' regular killing of Itsekiri civilians who have gone back to their original villages in attempt to restart their homes and lives. One Itsekiri youth bitterly denounced the federal government for its abject failure to protect the Itsekiri villagers; "all they care about protecting is oil," he said. Most striking were reports from the community leaders that a boat of 80 Itsekiri refugees heading for their original communities along the Benin River in Warri North local government area was attacked on October 7 by several speedboats of Ijaw militants. According to the refugee community leaders in Sapele, many of the passengers were killed. Some of the injured made it to Chevron's Escravos terminal, where they were treated at Chevron's clinic, although two of the villagers died on the Chevron dock before they could be treated, the elders claimed. (NOTE: While visiting Chevron's Escravos terminal and tank farm October 7, Mission officers were told by Chevron security personnel that some Itsekiri villagers -- the apparent victims of the waterborne Ijaw attack -- had arrived at Escravos asking for and receiving medical attention for gunshot wounds. END NOTE).

COMMENT

110. (C/NF) Indications from our varied sources on all sides suggest fighting is about to escalate in the Warri area. Unlike the mid-August round of fighting, which focused exclusively on Warri town, this will be deep in the swamp and may force the military to deploy into areas beyond its comfort level. Greater fighting could be triggered by any or all of three factors: an upsurge in reciprocal attacks on Ijaw and Itsekiri villages by each tribe's militants; attacks on Shell facilities by Ijaw militants demanding Shell compensation for resuming production in the area; or the military's plans to occupy Okerenkoko, egged on by Shell.

11. (S/NF) The plan to secure Okerenkoko and the surrounding Jones Creek area has Shell's fingerprints on it. Shell attempted to reopen its Jones Creek flow station in August, but was forced to retreat in the face of a militant threat. Such a new deployment seems more than the Nigerian military can sustain on its own, and most likely would depend on Shell's funding and involvement. Chevron, which has still not tried to resume its production in the area, seems to have distanced itself more from the Joint Task Force's operations -- although it continues to provide support GON security personnel stationed at its Escarvos terminal. Septel will report on the two companies' divergent policies towards the Warri fighting and resumption of production in this oil-rich swamp. End Comment.

ROBERTS